

THE DISCOVERY OF THE BOGONG HIGH PLAINS

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The Bogong High Plains were discovered by two stockmen, James Brown and John Wells, who were employed to look after the run at Cobungra which was taken up by George Gray in 1851. Gray, accompanied by Brown, Wells and two others, brought his cattle to Cobungra from a property called The Pelican, near Wangaratta. The move was undertaken immediately after the bushfires of Black Thursday (13 February 1851), when it became necessary to find grass for the cattle which survived. The route taken by Gray and party was as follows. They went first to Lockhart's Gap but finding no grass there they went on to Mitta Mitta Station, then held by Bowler. Again there was no grass available, but they fell in with an aboriginal called Larnie, who told them of Cobungra and offered to take them there. From Mitta Mitta they climbed the Gibbo Ra., went down the other side to Hinnomunjie Station (taken up in 1842), then on up Livingstone Cr. to the Bingo Gap. From the valley of Bingomunjie Cr. they crossed into the valley of the Cobungra and established their first camp at Dick's Cr. (now Crown Allotment 28, Parish of Bingomunjie). In the course of the next few years they moved further upstream and settled on the Victoria R. (Crown Allotment 11, Parish of Bingomunjie). The licence for the run is dated 4 June 1851. Its boundaries are not defined but it can be assumed that a boundary was agreed upon between it and the territory held by Hinnomunjie Station. Although Gray is officially the first to have held Cobungra he believed that others had been there before him. Andrews (1920) records that Cobungra was held by the Wells Brothers in 1842, but the source of this information has not yet been traced. There is no local tradition to support the statement. It appears clear, however, that Gray and his party were the first to open up the track between Mitta Mitta and Hinnomunjie. In the next few years it was much used by miners, by the Grays themselves, and by others who took cattle to market at Beechworth. The route also provided a very useful link between the North-east and the track between the Monaro and Gippsland which had been established some years earlier.

After their arrival in March 1851, Brown and Wells were left at Cobungra in charge of the cattle and lived there for some years. Brown realized that the track over the Gibbo Ra. was circuitous and argued that there must be a shorter way to Beechworth. Larnie had described to them as well as he could the Bogong High Plains and had told them also that the Omco and associated tribes of aboriginals went to the High Plains from their camp at the Bundarra R. via Bucketty Plain, that is, along the spur which joins the High Plains at Mt Cope. Brown and Wells followed this track and, once on the High Plains, set off in the direction of Mt Nelse. From the Nelse end of the Plains they had a view of the great spur of The Fainter and decided that it was the one to follow. By doing so they found their way into the North-east. It is not known whether it was on the return from their first trip or on their second journey that they found the alternative route over Mt Hotham, but they established both routes before they had been at Cobungra

for three years, and had also been over Mt Feathertop. Very shortly after the discovery of gold in Omeo (April 1854) the track over Mt Hotham was much used by miners and until recently there were in Omeo people still living who had been brought to the district as children over this track early in 1855.

Some of the names given by Brown and Wells to parts of the country still remain in use. Rocky Valley, Pretty Valley, Rocky Knobs, Mt Jim, Jim Stream, Feathertop, The Fainter, The Niggerheads, The Razorback, Blowhard and Bucketty Plain are well known. Skiers at Mt Hotham know J. B. (Plain), where Jim Brown carved his initials on a tree, the Old Wangaratta Bridge and Australia Drift. Other names were not officially recognized but are still in local use. Brown called Mt Hotham 'Baldy', and Mt Cope 'Mt Jack'. The older cattlemen still regret that Mt Jack is not the official name. Jim Brown and Johnny Wells are remembered as very great bushmen. Of the two, it is said that Jim Brown was the finer.

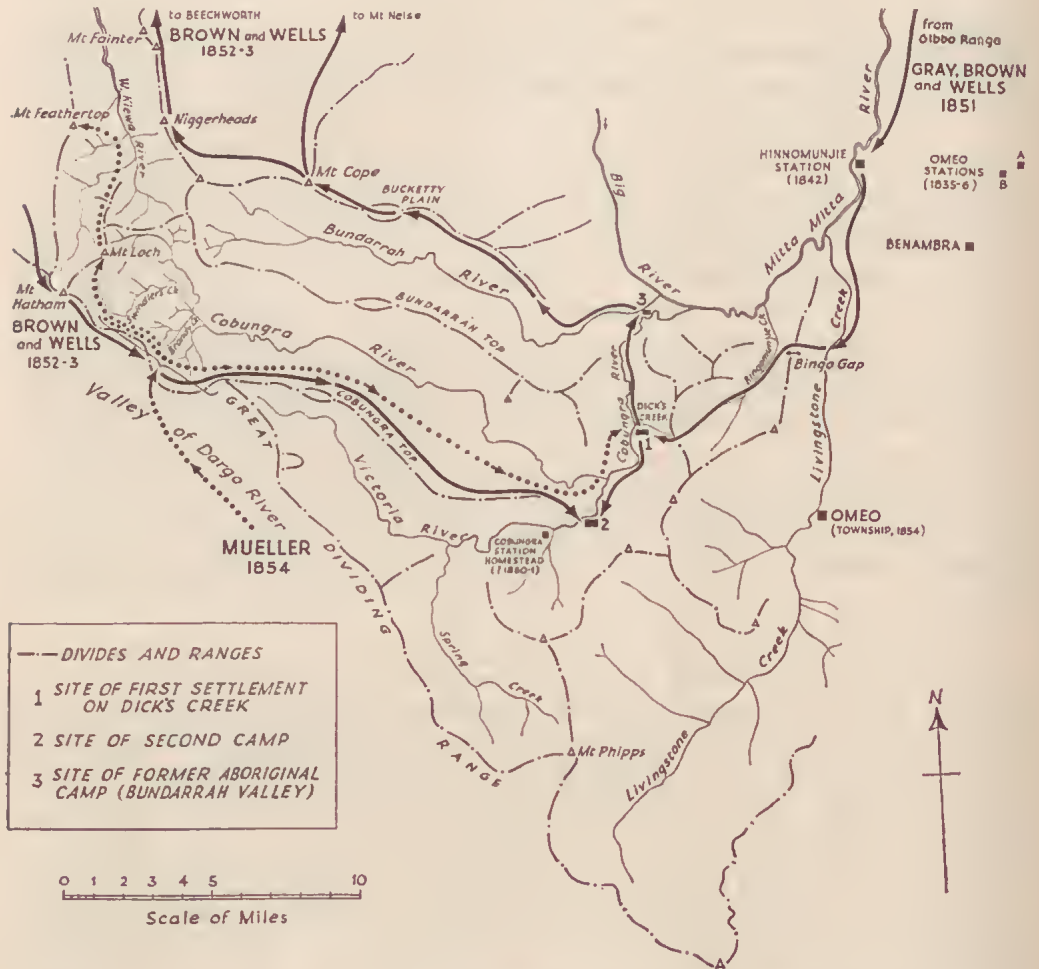


FIG. 1.

As it is generally believed that Baron von Mueller discovered the High Plains his claim to this distinction will now be considered. The relevant portion of his report is given in Appendix I.

He visited the North-east of the State in 1854, crossing the Dividing Ra. from the valley of the Dargo R. 'near the upper part of the Cobungra'. At the time he thought he had discovered the highest mountains in Australia and claimed to be the first civilized man to visit the area. Mueller climbed two peaks, one of which he wished to name Mt Latrobe, on 3 December, and the other which was to be called Mt Hotham, on 6 December. The identity of these peaks remained a mystery for many years because the compass bearings on other, already known mountains which he took from Mt Latrobe could not be reconciled with the more accurate work of later surveyors. However, Wakefield (1949) following a suggestion made by Barnard (1904) showed that if Mueller's compass readings are corrected to $33\frac{1}{2}^{\circ}$ Mt Latrobe can be identified as Mt Loch and Mt Hotham as Mt Feathertop. The compass error is attributed to magnetic interference from the Older Basalt capping of Mt Loch. This explanation is a very reasonable one, but Wakefield's interpretation of the route by which Mueller reached these peaks is open to some doubt.

Wakefield, relying on an old, very inaccurate sketch plan (not Mueller's) dated 1864, and perhaps misled by the mention of the Mitta Mitta (actually the West Kiewa R.) assumed that Mueller crossed the Divide near the site of the present-day Cobungra settlement, travelled by way of the Bundarra Top to the High Plains and thence to Mt Loch. It is difficult to justify this explanation either on the basis of the extent to which the geography of the area was known in 1854 or from Mueller's very brief report. After mining began, there was a great deal of traffic between Cobungra and the Dargo but there is no record or hint of any link between the two districts in 1854. Mueller does not mention his sources of local information but it can be argued that he had access to more than he acknowledged. For instance, he knew the name of the Cobungra and that the Cobungra and Dargo R. have a divide in common. He also knew that the Cobungra waters reached the Murray—a point which would not be obvious at the first sight of the headwaters and, further, he was able to make his way from Mt Feathertop to Omeo. In the absence of local knowledge this would have been a complex and difficult journey, chiefly because of the curious stream pattern of the intervening country.

Mueller's report states that, on leaving the Dargo valley (a) he traversed a grassy tableland in a NE. direction 'along the Cobungra downwards', (b) until the country to the N. appeared practicable and that (c) the ranges were timbered with *Eucalyptus pauciflora*. It is not clear whether Mueller distinguished between the Cobungra and its major tributary, the Victoria, into which Spring Cr. flows. If he did not do so he could have crossed the Divide anywhere between Mt Hotham and Mt Phipps. As the Divide and the major valleys all run approximately NW.-SE. in this area, the further he was from Mt Hotham when he made the crossing the more impossible it is that a course to the NE. would have allowed him a view of Mt Loch to the N. This strongly suggests that he crossed the Divide as he said, near the upper part of the Cobungra itself.

A closer examination of Mueller's statement in relation to the geography of the area confirms this. In the Divide between Mt Hotham and Mt Phipps three parts can be distinguished: the Spring Cr. section, the Victorian R. section and the Cobungra section. Table 1 sets out the extent to which each of these sections satisfies Mueller's description of the journey.

TABLE 1

Section of main Divide	Grassy tablelands	Stream course	View of mountains to the N.	Forest type
Spring Cr.	Not extensive	NE.	No	Higher parts <i>E. pauciflora</i> mostly mixed species
Victoria R.	In higher parts only	SW.	No	Higher parts <i>E. pauciflora</i> otherwise mixed species
Cobungra R.	Extensive	Large tributaries (Brandy Cr. & Swindler's Cr.) NE. Main stream E. of S.	Yes	<i>E. pauciflora</i>

It will be seen that the upper part of the Cobungra fulfils all the conditions. It seems most likely, therefore, that Mueller crossed into this area because the top and the spurs on the Cobungra side form, in places, a broad tableland and some of the spurs and tributaries (Brandy Cr. and Swindler's Cr.) run N.-E. It seems reasonable that Mueller rode across the top until he could get a clear outlook and then made for Mt Loch. Once there, Machinery Spur would present itself as an obvious route to the foot of Mt Feathertop.

This explanation is also satisfactory in that if, as it has been supposed, there was no link between the settlements in the Dargo valley and Cobungra at the time, once in the Dargo valley, Mueller would have had no reason (except the roughness and difficulty of the country) to leave it until he reached the headwaters. In conclusion, it is necessary to say that although there is no tradition that Brown and Wells saw Mueller on his way through, it seems likely that he made his way to Omeo by following the Cobungra downstream until he found their track leading to Omeo. On his journey from Omeo to Mt Kosciusko and his return to Gippsland via the Buchan R., Mueller undoubtedly followed the tracks established when settlement was extended from the Monaro to Benambra and the N. part of East Gippsland. To record these things does not detract from Mueller's achievement. His was a great and difficult journey, but it is more correct to regard him as the first official visitor than to accord him the status of original explorer.

Acknowledgements

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References

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Appendix I

Extract from Mueller's Report (1855)

Left Avon on the 22nd November, thence up the Mitchell, Wentworth and Dargo Rivers, and crossed the Dividing Range between the waters of Gippsland and the Murray near the upper part of the Cobungra. Thence I traversed the grassy tableland in a north-easterly direction, along the Cobungra downwards, until the country appeared practicable towards the north, to reach the highest part of the Bogong Ranges. The ranges hereabouts have never been traversed by civilised men. They are timbered with Mountain Gum-tree, *Eucalyptus phlebophylla*.* On the 3rd December I ascended the south-east of the two highest mountains of the Bogong Range, and believed it to be nearly 7,000 feet high. The much more abrupt and yet higher summit of the north-west mount I ascended from the Upper Mitta, which skirts the base, on 6th December; unquestionably several hundred feet higher. On both mountains mighty masses of snow lay far below the summit. Considering that mountains of such altitude, probably the two highest on the Australian continent, deserve distinctive names, I solicit His Excellency's permission to name the grandest of both Mt. Hotham, and the second in height Mt. Latrobe, as I trust to be entitled to the great honour of being the first man who ever reached these commanding summits of the Australian Alps.

* Now *E. pauciflora* Sieb.

Appendix II

A full account of the Gray's journey to Cobungra is in the possession of the author. It was given by Mr Michael MacNamara and his brothers, the late Edward and the late Patrick MacNamara, grand-nephews of George Gray. It was confirmed by the late Mr George Fitzgerald and the late Mr John MacCrae, both of whom also provided information about the discovery of gold in Omeo. All these people knew Brown and Wells. The dates in the original account and the information given concerning the names of the owners and managers and the boundaries of the various stations in the early part of 1851 have been checked by reference to other sources, some of which are official documents. These provide other corroboration of the verbal evidence. The original licence issued to George Gray was seen at the Department of Lands and Survey, Melbourne.